

NH Blue and You: Dover *Creating Community Change Through Connection*

November 2016
Dover, New Hampshire

A NH Listens Summary Report
January 18, 2017



ABOUT NH LISTENS



New Hampshire Listens is a civic engagement initiative of the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire.

Our mission:

To bring people together for engaged conversations

Our work:

- Create engaged community conversations on local and statewide issues
- Serve as a resource and support network for new local Listens groups
- Cultivate a network of facilitators for public engagement and action

Our principles:

- Bring people together from all walks of life
- Provide time for in-depth, informed conversations
- Respect differences as well as seek common ground
- Achieve outcomes that lead to informed community solutions

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Background

In November of 2016, over ninety people attended the NH Blue and You community conversation at Flight Coffee Co. in Dover, New Hampshire. NH Blue and You—a partnership of the Seacoast and Manchester NAACP, NH Listens, and the NH Association of Chiefs of Police—was initiated to provide interested communities an opportunity for conversation between residents and law enforcement on critically important policing issues. The local event was hosted by the Dover Police Department, Dover Listens, the Dover Housing Authority, and the Greater Dover Chamber of Commerce.

The discussions took place on the evening of Tuesday, November 15, 2016 from 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. and were open to the entire community. Save the date information and flyers were shared through a variety of methods in the community (flyer may be found in Appendix A). Only two individuals preregistered, but the room quickly filled with ninety-two total attendees, including about twelve officers from the Dover Police Department. Participants were split into nine small groups, each with a trained facilitator.

Questions to Explore

During the conversation, which lasted about two hours, attendees were asked to share their vision for a healthy community-police relationship, acknowledge what is already working in Dover, as well as what isn't, and connect with someone who has a different perspective. The planning group, made up of interested community members and representatives from the local sponsoring organizations, determined the following four goals for the event:

1. Create a casual environment; build on what is already working in Dover
2. Build an event that encourages conversations about race; learn how personal and community histories and racial experiences have shaped how people think about policing
3. Get at the issues causing anxiety; take stock of our community assets and challenges; honor the stories people bring to the table
4. Be assured police policy questions are on table so we can work on action ideas with others

In acknowledgement of the national context, these discussions were guided in part by sharing background information synthesized from the Black Lives Matter Platform, the Campaign Zero Local Policy Agenda (10 Policy Solutions to End Police Violence in America), and the Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The full discussion guide can be found in Appendix B. Key questions explored were:

- *What is our vision for a proactive, healthy relationship between a community and its police department?*
- *What is working in Dover with respect to community-police relations?*
- *What do you notice about the recommendations of national organizations?*
- *What questions do you have for police and community members?*
- *What issues need to be addressed in Dover, taking into account the views presented in the reports?*
- *What more do we need to know? Where do we start?*

What follows is a detailed description of the key themes of the conversations and an analysis of all small group notes (found in Appendix D). These results help decision makers identify areas for further consideration and action. The results of the conversations, as presented in this report, are intended to be shared with all those who participated, as well as partners and decision makers. The full report with appendices may be found at carsey.unh.edu/nhlistens/reports.

What Priorities Emerged?

Although each participant reflected his/her own point of view, clear commonalities emerged about the opportunities and challenges for the relationship between Dover’s community members and law enforcement. Throughout the discussion five major themes surfaced across conversations: the importance of learning more about each other, a police force representative of the community they serve, role clarity for school resource officers, trust building through transparency and accountability, and community outreach and engagement.

Learning More About Each Other

Throughout the conversation, two-way education and information sharing emerged as a theme. While police training was a major part of the discussion, many felt that it was important to provide educational opportunities to community members about law enforcement and what police do. These opportunities were seen as particularly important for youth and new Americans.

A number of topics for police training were identified as priorities: cultural and religious diversity, race and implicit bias, homelessness, mental health, and substance abuse. Substance abuse was discussed in more detail than the others. Many attendees noted that it is important to shift attention to preventative—rather than punitive—approaches and, additionally, some felt it is okay to shift attention from lower level drugs (such as marijuana) altogether, so that law enforcement can focus on the opioid epidemic in the state.

Training for police on how to deal with cultural and religious differences was also a common theme. Participants noted that patience with English-language learners in schools and the community is critical. Some said that police should spend more energy engaging with community members of different backgrounds to gain experience. One group suggested a “question and answer” session in the church environment. In general, an improved experience with police for people of color and immigrants was consistently mentioned.

A Police Force Representative of the Community

In addition to the emphasis on diversity in officer training, many felt that Dover’s police department should strive to hire diverse staff so that the police department best reflects the community it serves. Efforts to this effect were shared with participants by officers and the desire for community assistance in the matter expressed. Some talked about the difficulty in recruiting and retaining female officers and officers of color. A more diverse force was seen as one way to reduce an “us versus them” perception.

Role Clarity for School Resource Officers

Discussion about the role of law-enforcement in schools was a major theme. Most attendees agreed that police officers present in schools should act as educators for students. The goal of the Student Resource Officer (SRO) should be to teach and counsel students on good behavior and lifestyle choices, and students should understand that the SRO is there for his/her safety.

The SRO should be particularly sensitive when dealing with students who are English-language learners or have varying cultural norms and religious beliefs.

Many attendees noted that the school—rather than the SRO—should be held accountable for student behavior and discipline, keeping the role of the SRO as an educator intact. The presence of law enforcement in schools should foster positive relationships between young people and the police. A positive relationship will help young people avoid feeling fearful of police or viewing the role of the police officer as strictly punitive.

Trust Through Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and trust emerged as major themes throughout the conversation. Many reported feeling that police should demonstrate a willingness to respond to citizen concerns with honesty, a friendly demeanor, and an openness to listen. One group discussed the creation of a network of community members and professionals in Dover to whom the police can reach out to with questions regarding numerous topics, including ones related to culture.

Methods of oversight and accountability, such as body cameras and other surveillance methodology, were mentioned by many groups. Others suggested that the creation of a community advisory board was key to continued citizen input and oversight.

Community Outreach and Engagement

Participants expressed both positive and negative aspects of the overall relationship between police and community members in Dover. Many seemed to agree that this is an area in which Dover is already doing well. Nearly every group noted that, because police officers in Dover are often on horseback or bicycle, they are visible and approachable. Attendees also seemed to agree that the Dover PD does a good job building and maintaining relationships with schools and businesses by attending events (such as “coffee with the mayor”) and by joining boards.

While nearly all agreed that Dover has a strong foundation in community outreach, improved communication and collaboration was identified as a top priority in every working group. Attendees noted that citizens and police should feel comfortable engaging in conversation with one another. Embedded in this was the concept of mutual respect and support and opportunities for education, which flows in both directions. Addressing power dynamics was identified by many groups as a component of a collaborative relationship. Many attendees were eager for more opportunities like this for two-way communication between Police and community members. Some were interested especially in targeted conversations with specific groups that are underrepresented in Dover.

When discussing opportunities for two-way collaboration, trust emerged as a theme. Many felt that the police voice and the community voice have equal importance and that Dover should strive to honor the collective knowledge of these two groups. This became especially apparent when discussing decision-making processes. Many attendees noted that they felt local decision making is valuable and sometimes preferred over state- or national-level decision making. Some pointed out that the action recommendations included in the discussion guide are primarily “top-down,” focusing on federal legislation, whereas the attendees seemed to prefer a “bottom-up” approach beginning with their voices. Most agreed that continuing this conversation was high priority.

Participant Attendance and Evaluation Summary

NH Listens gathers basic demographic data to provide information on who was interested and able to attend this NH Blue and You event in Dover, New Hampshire. It's important to note that the content of this report has been generated from the people who attended the event and, consequently, does not represent all voices or viewpoints in Dover.

While 92 people participated in this community conversation, only 36 completed a participant evaluation (39 percent). One group stands out as underrepresented in the data—youth. One small group of participants was entirely youth under 18. Still, the demographic information presented here from the event indicates a mix of backgrounds and experiences. Other than the youth voice group, participants ranged in age from 22 to 73 years old, with a nearly balanced mix of men and women. Racial diversity was identified as a priority when planning this event; of those who completed an evaluation, 3 percent identified as black, 3 percent identified as mixed-race, 18 percent identified as Asian, and the remainder identified as white or Caucasian. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that this conversation allowed them to meet and talk with people from their community that they did not previously know and that the conversation made it likely that they will be involved in the future. The conversations were overwhelmingly rated strongly as helping participants understand points of view that are different from their own. A full summary of the participant evaluation may be found in Appendix D.

Conclusion

Over ninety people from the community squeezed into Flight Coffee for a conversation about community-police relations in Dover. Participants with a range of ages, races, and educational backgrounds were represented at this event. Attendees' final recommendations and key areas of concern can be used by decision makers to inform next steps, as well as prioritize issues that were identified in a process that promoted democratic deliberation and lifted the community voice. At a time when relationships between communities and their police departments are strained, the Dover community took proactive steps to increase engagement and invite shared problem solving.

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